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The Surrealist Toy, or The Adventures of the Bilboquet

ILLUSTRATION 1: Opening illustration: Giacometti: Suspended Ball (1930-1)

The role of the toy, as a source for visual surrealism, has hardly been considered before now and even within avant-garde studies, the toy is only just beginning to be looked at as an exemplar for modernist/avant-garde art.¹ There is, to be sure, a growing literature on play, and Dada studies in particular have begun to register the importance of the ludic, alongside its various material manifestations in Dadaist practice.² Yet, whilst play has always been thought to be fundamental to Surrealism, the surrealist toy has remained under-examined. Certainly, given the marked turn towards material culture in Art History the specific attributes of toys seem ripe for attention; in this regard, historians of design have led art historians in paying attention to the things of play.³ Whatever its role in design history, however, it is clear that the toy has always been of great interest to painters and sculptors, not least because of its poetic resonance; its links to the childish imagination. Toys as (predominantly) three-dimensional objects lend themselves particularly well to sculpture. This essay therefore brings the specificities of the toy, surrealism and sculpture together in a new alignment.

It is important to note that 'sculpture' in its traditional sense was not accorded a privileged status within surrealism. In broad terms, the surrealists were pledged to challenging media hierarchies or limits. In that sense the readymade and the notion of the *objet* within surrealism are as central to what we might traditionally think of 'sculpture' as the notion of carved, modelled or constructed entities. It also has to be emphasised that surrealism in no way privileged visual art over philosophical, poetic or textual practices; it is inappropriate therefore to look at 'surrealist sculpture' as some form of technical *modus operandi* existing in a vacuum, answerable solely to *sculptural* or

even *aesthetic* conventions or traditions. This essay culminates with a new reading of a celebrated work by one of the twentieth century's most celebrated surrealist sculptors, Alberto Giacometti, *Suspended Ball* of 1930, by looking again at the drawings by Giacometti which preceded it. One of my central concerns is to move beyond Rosalind Krauss's canonical reading of this work.⁴ But it has to be borne in mind that *Suspended Ball*, whilst partly operating in terms of the conventions of carving, was also an opening onto the cult of the surrealist *objet* of the early 1930s. It seems entirely appropriate then to look at Giacometti's celebrated sculpture as related to a specific type of *object*, namely a toy. In order to situate the work convincingly in these terms it is necessary first of all to consider what kind of object a toy might actually be, and how this theme was taken up in surrealist theory via the likes of Walter Benjamin and Roger Caillois. It is also necessary to pay attention to pre-surrealist painting – particularly that of de Chirico – and to consider issues such as the formative deployment of the doll and the readymade in Duchamp, and the mobilisation of *scale* (miniaturisation) in the work of Duchamp and Cornell. Such issues illuminate the way the material characteristics of toys were registered in Surrealism. Indeed the question of the toy's *formal nature*, along with its symbolic attributes, will emerge as one of the central threads of the argument that follows.

The Philosophy of Toys

What, then, are toys? Looked at from a historical point of view, they are surprisingly unstable entities. The historian of childhood Philippe Ariès, while largely accepting the seemingly common-sense view that toys are objects that have evolved from adult-usage to child-usage, reaches the conclusion that, historically-speaking, there is no clear way of distinguishing between adult uses of miniaturised objects and children's toys:

*Historians of the toy, and collectors of dolls and toy miniatures, have always had considerable difficulty in separating the doll, the child's toy, from all the other images and statuettes which the sites of excavations yield up ... and which more often than not had a religious significance: objects of a household or funerary cult, relics from a pilgrimage etc ... I am not suggesting that in the past children did not play with dolls or replicas of adult belongings. But they were not the only ones to use these replicas; what in modern times was to become their monopoly, they had to share in ancient times, at least with the dead.*⁵

It is clear from this, then, that toys do not necessarily have to be seen as synonymous with childhood; neither are they necessarily light-hearted in their implications; folded within them there are ritual and cultic implications that we have lost sight of. Toys, in sense, have been 'naturalized' within our society; their ubiquity, as part of commercial mass culture, means that we have lost a sense of their peculiar nature as objects. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has been pre-eminent in theorizing the fundamental instability of the toy as a category. In one essay he enlists other theorists to develop his ideas. One of these is the poet Rainer Maria Rilke who explored the essentially fetishistic logic of children's relations to toys. Rilke describes the terrible unresponsiveness of the child's doll to the efforts its owner makes to feed and water it (it is "incapable of absorbing at any point even a single drop of water."⁶) As a result, he argues that "hatred that, unconscious, has always constituted a part of our relation to it, breaks forth: the doll lies before us unmasked like the horrible strange body on which we have dissipated our purest warmth."⁷ The uncanny life of toys alluded to here, which repeatedly crops up as a theme in children's literature - Pinocchio is just one example - is extended by Agamben into a discussion of the way in which toys elude any precise positioning in terms of our inner and outer worlds. Here Agamben references the work of the British psychologist Donald Woods Winnicott and his notion of the transitional object. Such an object, which exists, as Winnicott suggestively remarks, 'between the thumb and the teddy bear' and is likely to be a scrap of blanket or an early comforter, represents the

child's first 'not-me' object: the means by which an intermediate zone is initially established between the subjective and the objectively-perceived world.⁸ Extrapolating from these ideas, Agamben concludes:

*Things are not outside of us, in measurable external space, like the neutral objects (ob-jecta) of use and exchange ... Like the fetish, like the toy, things are not properly anywhere, because their place is found on this side of objects and beyond the human in a zone that is no longer objective or subjective, neither personal nor impersonal, neither material nor immaterial, but where we find ourselves suddenly facing these apparently so simple unknowns: the human, the thing.*⁹

It becomes evident, then, that toys, as objects which have always inhabited an ambiguous zone vis-à-vis the reality principle, serve adults, as much as children, as means of expressing anxieties, yearnings, fantasies and so forth. The psychological space inhabited by the toy will be returned to shortly here, but, in focusing attention on their essential strangeness in a further essay, Agamben devotes close attention to the process of miniaturization that is so intrinsic to the identity of toys. Linking the miniaturisation of the toy with its temporality, he argues that toys are abstracted both from the *diachronic* dimension of time, in so far as they take their starting-point from ritual (he writes "everything which is old, independent of its sacred origins, is liable to become a toy"¹⁰) and from the *synchronic* dimension, in so far as they are modelled on objects from the utilitarian, economically-driven sphere of everyday existence ("objects which still belong to the sphere of use: a car, a pistol...are at once transformed into toys, thanks to miniaturisation"¹¹). He thus argues that:

The toy is what belonged – once, no longer – to the realm of the sacred or of the practical-economicWhat the toy preserves of its sacred or economic model, what survives of this after its dismemberment or miniaturization, is nothing other than the human temporality

*that was contained therein: its pure historical essence. The toy is a materialisation of the historicity contained in objects.*¹²

Reflections such as these by Agamben are crucial in raising the theoretical status of the humble toy, from something which is merely a 'plaything' to something which responds both to the psychological and temporal dimensions of human existence. I will return to the idea of miniaturisation and temporality shortly, but, unsurprisingly, it is the psychological resonances of the toy which made it so fertile for Surrealism.

Agamben, of course, referred to the 'object relations' psychology of Winnicott, with the 'transitional object' (a kind of precursor to the toy for the child) providing a mediating point between the self and the world. The toy itself comes more to the fore, though, in the pioneering psycho-analysis of children practised by the Melanie Klein in Germany and Britain between the 1920s and 60s. Here toys became the symbols of a more internalised form of 'phantasy'. Freud himself mentioned toys but rarely devoted much attention to them and consequently he does not play a part in this discussion. It also seems necessary to downplay the significance of André Breton in this context. Although normally seen as the conduit by which psychological theories of various kinds entered the theoretical bloodstream of Surrealism, when it came to matters of children's play, Breton tended to revert to sentimentalisation: "Children set off each day without a worry in the world. Everything is at hand, the worst material conditions are fine. The woods are white or black, one will never sleep."¹³ He seems in fact to have said little of consequence about toys, aside from one notable exception in his writing about Picasso which I will discuss later. To appreciate how discourse around the toy took root in surrealism it is more useful in fact to turn to the German critic Walter Benjamin, whose key essay 'Surrealism : The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' of 1929 saw him enter into a significant dialogue with the maturing movement.

At around this time Benjamin had written two substantial reviews of an important historical study of children's toys, Karl Gröber's *Children's Toys from Olden Times*, first published in Berlin in 1928, having acquired a small collection of Russian folk toys during his stay in Moscow in 1926-7, planning to publish photographs of them alongside an explanatory article. It is Benjamin's attention to the toy as an object with its own specific integrity that serve as the most useful theoretical frame for the toy's role within surrealism. One of Benjamin's central concerns in these reviews is to show that the toy essentially tells us more about adults than children:

*The fact is that the perceptual world of the child is influenced at every point by traces of the older generation, and has to take issue with them. The same applies to the child's play activities. It is impossible to construct them as dwelling in a fantasy realm, a fairy-tale land of pure childhood, or pure art. Even where they are not simple imitations of the tools of adults, toys are a site of conflict, less of the child with the adult than of the adult with the child. For who gives the child his toys if not adults? And even if he retains a certain power to accept or reject them, a not insignificant proportion of the oldest toys (balls, hoops, tops, kites) are in a certain sense imposed on him as cultic implements that become toys only afterward, partly through the child's power of imagination.*¹⁴

Elsewhere he asserts that the 'dour naturalism' of certain traditional toys reflect little of the childish experience. He criticises the over-sophistication and increase of scale in marketed toys, seeing these as determined as much by the needs of the toy industry as those of the child: the most rudimentary, and least expensive, objects are often the most successful toys. Fundamentally, toys do not determine the way children play, but are rather called into being by the child's imaginative needs :
"A child wants to pull something, and so he becomes a horse...he wants to hide, and so he turns into a robber or a policeman."¹⁵ Such passages recall Benjamin's own understanding of his childhood experiences in his essay 'Berlin Childhood around 1900' where, in one section for instance, he recalls the imaginative transformations afforded by the hiding places in his home:

*I already knew all the hiding places in the house...My heart would pound...Here I was enveloped in the world of matter. It became monstrously distinct for me, loomed speechlessly near...The child who stands behind the doorway curtain himself becomes something white that flutters, a ghost. The dining table under which he has crawled turns him into a wooden idol of the temple; its carved legs are four pillars.*¹⁶

Benjamin's attention to play and to the material objects that stimulate it - both in their specific nature and their psychological effects - stand at the dawn of a museological and scholarly interest in the toy as an artefact ; as he noted in one of the 1928 'toys' essays : "Research of this kind is in tune with the age. The German Museum in Munich, the Toy Museum in Moscow, the toy department of the Musée des Arts Decoratifs in Paris – all creations of the recent past – point to the fact that everywhere, and no doubt for good reason, there is a growing interest in honest-to-goodness toys." ¹⁷ His writings are fully in line with a scholarly, ethnographic approach to the child which, in the French context, was part and parcel of the rise of ethnology as a discipline and is closely intertwined with the history of Surrealism. *Documents*, the ethnologically-orientated journal of the so-called 'dissident' surrealist group - edited by Georges Bataille alongside key members of the French ethnographic intelligentsia, duly reflected the growing attention to the child as a cultural construct. Bataille himself published an important response to a study on children's drawing, '*L'art primitif*' (1930) by the psychologist Georges Luquet. ¹⁸ Benjamin steered clear of this 'primitivising' discourse around childhood, but his affinities with Bataille would eventually lead to a fleeting association with the forum for research that Bataille and his associates set up some years after the demise of *Documents*, the Collège de Sociologie, in the late 1930s. ¹⁹ Benjamin seems to have had contact, during 1937-38, with Bataille and the social theorist Roger Caillois in particular, and, although Benjamin had deep reservations about Caillois's work, it is ironic that it should be Caillois who, two years after Benjamin's death, published a significant essay in a surrealist journal echoing Benjamin's concern with the materiality and psychological resonance of toys.

The essay in question, Callois' 'The Myth of the Secret Treasures in Childhood' of 1942 was published in the first edition of *VVV*, the journal which acted as the intellectual rallying-point for the transplanted surrealist group in New York midway through the Second World War. It signals, at a rather late date in the chronology of surrealism, how childish modes of thought, and children's perceptions of objects, dovetailed with the preoccupations of the movement. Callois' main concern was to examine the hoarding instinct he had observed both in himself as a child and children in general, and the way objects of a magical nature are secreted away by the child:

The child takes infinite precautions to lift the wallpaper, scrape out the plaster behind, place within the hollow his prodigious deposit, and to paste back, as best he can, the torn paper in what appears to be the most accidental way, or, conversely, in accordance with the pattern of the designs. ²⁰

Callois's attentiveness to the treasures amassed by the child ("these bits of glass, these drops of mercury, these rolling dice" ²¹) is reminiscent of Benjamin, as is the stress he places on the way the child's possessions and playthings correspond to purely imaginative needs and have little conventional value :

It is not the sale value of these objects that make them precious, that is often nil... They are often found in the gutters. It is not that they are rare, but that they are coin of another realm. They are not beautiful, but brilliant. The child therefore keeps the tinfoil that wrapped his chocolate bar. He rates 'steelies' above all other marbles. ²²

In his overall argument in the essay, Callois propounded an account of childhood that was quite opposed to the idealizations of André Breton and even of the former surrealist Michel Leiris, a fellow member of the Collège de Sociologie, whose 1938 paper on 'The Sacred in Everyday Life' Callois was partly responding to. Whereas Breton and Leiris upheld the revelatory nature of childish experience in its own right (Leiris saw in his own childish memories "the combination of respect, desire, and

terror that we take as the psychological sign of the sacred"²³) Caillois largely saw the amassing of 'treasures' and the imaginative flights involved as a means by which the child builds up a strong inner world (ego) as a preparation for adulthood. The text is particularly important, though, as a contribution to an understanding of the child's intimate relationship with the materiality of objects.

Surrealist toys: miniaturisation and dolls

Looking now at surrealist art, the most natural candidate to look at in terms of the reception of these ideas is the American surrealist Joseph Cornell. Although the link has not been examined before, Cornell's boxes of the early 1940s may easily have responded to Caillois contemporaneous text in *VVV*. As Caillois, with his talk of hiding places and fragments of glass, said: "it is as though the objects that the child treasures were able to retain within a small mass, ordinary enough in appearance, a beauty, a force, a mystery that resides only in the essence of elements."²⁴ Works by Cornell such as his various *Pharmacies* of 1943, with their apothecary jars full of ephemera such as dried leaves, tin foil, copper wire and corks, resonate powerfully with Caillois's writings.

Cornell also evokes for us Agamben's talk of miniaturisation and opens the way to another key stage of this discussion. In the early 1940s Cornell was in close contact in New York with the newly-arrived Marcel Duchamp who had also been working on a project concerned with the principle of miniaturisation: his eminently toy-like collection of small versions of his earlier works in his *Boîte-en-Valise*. Whereas Cornell's boxes embodied an essentially romantic or late Symbolist sensibility, Duchamp's *Boîte* ironically inhabits the era of mass production. Certain of his miniatures, such as the tiny urinal, were, of course, hand-made versions of what had previously been mass-produced readymade items. Susan Stewart illuminates what may be at work here when, discussing miniaturized products of mechanized labour such as model aeroplanes or cars, she says: "These

toys are nostalgic in a fundamental way, for they completely transform the mode of production of the original and they miniaturize it: they produce a representation of alienated labour, a representation which is itself constructed by artisanal labour.”²⁵ Returning to Agamben here, we might recall his notion that the miniaturised toy is a *materialisation of historicity*.

If we now use this phrase as a prompt to backtrack on the historicity of the *surrealist* toy, it is interesting that both Cornell and Duchamp may well have been inspired, in terms of using their box-like constructions and miniaturised objects, by a relatively little-known photograph of a window display, most likely constructed by Andre Breton and Louis Aragon, which had featured in the March 1928 issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste*. (**ILLUSTRATION 2: BRETON/ARAGON: CIT-JIT DE CHIRICO**) The display, which possessed the unsparing title *Ci-gît de Chirico* (‘here lies de Chirico’) had been part of an exhibition dedicated to denigrating the former surrealist hero, at that time considered to have been squandering his talents on a revived classicism. It included a model of the *Leaning Tower of Pisa* and a miniature sewing-machine and referenced the strange dislocations of scale and prop-like objects to be found in de Chirico’s classic ‘Metaphysical’ paintings. (One of the surrealists’ direct reference points was de Chirico’s *Furniture in the Valley* painting of 1927 which was on display at Rosenberg’s Paris gallery in 1928; it depicted a jumble of household objects, ambiguous in scale and weirdly decontextualised in an outdoor setting). And this, of course, allows us to backtrack further into the *pre-history* of the surrealist toy, for it was in a group of de Chirico’s seminal Metaphysical canvases of 1914-15, most famously *The Evil Genius of a King* of 1914, that the image of the toy first entered into the repertoire of surrealist art: (**ILLUSTRATION 3: DE CHIRICO : EVIL GENIUS OF A KING**)

When he discussed these works in his writings, de Chirico said that they were meant to evoke a particular sensation : “ To live in a world as if in an immense museum of strangeness, full of curious many-coloured toys which change their appearance, which, like little children, we sometimes break to see how they are made on the inside, and, disappointed, realise they are empty.”²⁶ There is an

unmistakeable allusion here to one of the founding modernist texts on the toy, Baudelaire's 'Morale de Joujou' essay of 1853 in which the child is described as doing precisely the same thing, breaking open his toy in search of its mysterious inner life, its soul:

The overriding desire of most children is to get at and see the soul of their toys...It is on the more or less swift invasion of this desire that depends the length of life of a toy...The child twists and turns his toy, scratches it, shakes it, bumps it against the walls, throws it on the ground. ...Its marvellous life comes to a stop. The child...makes a supreme effort; at last he opens it up, he is the stronger. But where is the soul? ²⁷

Interestingly Breton had evoked precisely this passage in the course of a famous analogy between Picasso's work and toys made in his key statement on visual surrealism, the essay 'Surrealism and Painting' first published in *La Révolution Surrealiste* in 1925: "when we were children we had toys that would make us weep with pity and anger today. One day, perhaps, we shall see the toys of our whole life spread before us like those of our childhood." ²⁸ At one point he calls Baudelaire to mind when describing Picasso's works as "tragic toys for adults". However, as we have seen, de Chirico's inspiration had been much more directly Baudelaireian. It is interesting, in fact, that when Breton incorporated the 'Surrealism and Painting' essay among others in the full blown book-length version of *Surrealism And Painting* of 1927, *The Evil Genius of a King* was one of several new images brought in to illustrate the text and it is likely that Breton was hinting at certain chains of association that had not been evident in the essay as originally published. The mysterious toy-like forms from 'The Evil Genius of the King' might easily be construed as the 'tragic toys' originally mentioned by Breton in relation to Picasso, given the Nietzschean and classical themes that lie behind de Chirico's output. This again underlines the fact that de Chirico's importance for Surrealism was repressed in the mid-1920s, with Picasso now positioned as the guiding artistic deity. When *Surrealism and Painting* was republished in 1927, just prior to Aragon and Breton producing their shop window display parodying de Chirico, his 'tragic toys' ironically crept back into view.

As with Baudelaire, it is precisely the brittle nature of appearances, the interior hollowness of the object-world of modernity, with which de Chirico was concerned. De Chirico's art, as Paolo Baldacci has shown, is an art of memory (Mnemosyne) in which present and ancient time are shunted together, and forgotten truths are hinted at beyond the world of mundane appearances.²⁹ The objects depicted in de Chirico's paintings are often indicated by empty vessels; fish and seashells are represented via tin moulds, statues are represented via plaster casts or copies: as in the 1914 *Portrait of Apollinaire* (Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris). It is a world of empty husks and facades; its hollowness is directly indexed to the experience of the child breaking open the toy. De Chirico in fact shared a melancholic vision of toys with his brother Alberto Savinio. Toys (and illustrated books) figured powerfully in the shared childhood memories of the brothers; Giorgio, for instance, recalled an 'enormous mechanical butterfly' brought as a present by his father from Paris when they were young.³⁰ Between 1928 and 1930 Savinio would himself produce a series of paintings generically described as 'Monuments to Toys'. Even more than his brother Giorgio's toys, Alberto's, with their parodic gaiety and patently synthetic, saccharine colours, connote the false allure of toys for the child (or for the adult); the promise of a satisfaction which will not be met, a longing that cannot be fulfilled. It is significant also that many of the cityscapes presented in de Chirico's toy-related paintings are based on sets in toy theatres. In actual fact de Chirico worked, for much of his career, and not just in the period favoured by the surrealists, from scaled-down models – toy horses and the like – his final studio in Rome contains a number of such visual props.³¹ And this was clearly what the surrealists registered when, in the *Cit-gît de Chirico* provocation, they re-presented miniaturised items from his visual world in a box-like format.

It is clear then that the surrealist discourse of the toy and miniaturization has its roots in De Chirico, but what I would like to do in the last part of this essay, is to return to another aspect of both Ariès and Agamben's thought about the instability of the toy's cultic roots, which link it as much with dolls, statuettes and mortality as childish play. And to do this, I want to look at another strand of the toy's position within Surrealism which begins with one man, Duchamp, and two examples of toys

that were particularly prevalent in French culture in the early twentieth century: firstly the doll itself, and later, the bilboquet.

When thinking about dolls in the context of Surrealism it is Hans Bellmer who naturally springs to mind, but it is Marcel Duchamp who pre-empted the genre with an early drawing, *Walking Doll* (*Bébé marcheur*), a 'cartoon' published in the illustrated journal *Le Courrier français* in January 1910, which has been given surprisingly scant attention in the Duchamp literature. (**ILLUSTRATION 4 : DUCHAMP/WALKING DOLL DRAWING**) Like de Chirico, Duchamp should be seen as a precedent not only for Bellmer but for an entire strand of toy discourse within surrealism. Duchamp's career began as much as a popular illustrator as a painter, with risqué sketches for satirical magazines featuring in his early output.³² The vernacular imagery of advertising and commerce were among his favoured resources. In this particular image, which takes the form of a mock-advertisement, he depicts a girl's doll – one of a specific genre that had been available in the large department stores throughout Duchamp's adolescence. From the mid-1870s, with the production of Emile Jumeau's *Bébé Jumeau* (1876-8), France had been a leading manufacturer of dolls, to the extent that in the period leading up to 1914 French toy production – particularly of dolls - was seriously threatening the previous market dominance of Germany in this domain. The automated doll - which could walk, talk, dance or kiss – was one of the features of the 1890s, and led to such creations as *Bébé Premiers Pas* (manufactured by Steiner), *Bébé Baiser* (by Bru), *Bébé Phonographique* (by Jumaean) and *L'intrépide Bébé* (by Rouillet-Decamps) (**ILLUSTRATION 5: DOLL ADVERTISEMENT : ROULLET-DECAMPS**) The latter was the most widely celebrated, and available up until 1910.³³ Such mechanical toys were featured prominently in the end-of-year catalogues of the big department stores, and it is likely that one such advertisement was the source for Duchamp's skit on a product of precisely this kind in *Le Courrier française*, as is evident in Duchamp's title 'Bébé marcheur'. Duchamp's doll is accompanied by a list of her attributes (" she closes her eyes, blows kisses with both hands, all parts guaranteed to move"), concluding with the assurance that "she undresses completely." A caption accompanying the image asserts that the product is from a "catalogue for elderly gentlemen", opening up the

possibility that, apart from summoning up the fantasies of ageing males, the image might actually be a risqué allusion to paedophilia and prostitution. (These are precisely the kind of allusions Bellmer would later explore.)

As it happens, this doll who undresses so readily can be seen as one of the earliest formulations of the idea of the Bride, to be given full expression in Duchamp's later, highly elaborate, *Large Glass* (1913-23), where, as an automatic response, she 'strips' for her audience of Bachelors.³⁴ Duchamp himself once stated that the idea of the Bride had arisen from his experience of country fairs in his youth, where spectators threw balls at marionettes representing bride and groom, but the prior existence of the *Bébé Marcheur* drawing suggests that a more sexually perverse allusion to childish playthings was also at stake. Apart from foreshadowing Bellmer and surrealist discourse of the early 1930s, this small drawing opens onto a more problematic aspects of surrealist taste, the cult of the *femme enfant* (or woman-child) which can skirt close to paedophilia at times.

Adventures of the Bilboquet: Re-interpreting Giacometti

Duchamp seems to have pre-empted another surrealist choice of toy. Although it is only slowly dawning on art historians, a child's bilboquet arguably constituted the first readymade, the first everyday object *signed* by Duchamp. (**ILLUSTRATION 6 :DUCHAMP/BILBOQUET**) and hence the initiator of an entire approach to the utilitarian or domestic object within surrealist discourse.

However, it is important to note that, rather than representing a conceptual gesture, this proto-readymade - a child's plaything no less - was originally conceived as a present for a friend; dating from 1910, at a time when Duchamp was still a painter intent on absorbing the latest avant-garde tendencies, it bears the inscription : " Bilboquet / Souvenir of Paris/ For my friend Max Bergmann/ Duchamp spring 1910".

Max Bergmann, a painter of cows who had specialised in the genre at the Art Academy in Munich, and whom Duchamp first got to know in Paris in 1910 - subsequently visiting in Munich in 1912 - noted in his diary that "Duchamp gave me his bilboquet as a present." ³⁵ It seems, therefore, that it was a souvenir on two levels: on the one hand it had *belonged to Duchamp himself* and represented a souvenir of his own childhood. On the other hand it was probably a souvenir of something far from innocent: the erotic adventures that Duchamp and Bergmann apparently undertook together in Paris in March-April 1910. ³⁶ In French literature the components of the bilboquet - cup/spike and ball – and the way they were conjoined in the process of catching the ball on the spike – had often been given ambiguous erotic connotations. In Guy de Maupassant's *Bel Ami* (1885) Georges Duroy, the book's hero and a man of irresistible attraction to women, is given a bilboquet by his friend Charles Forestier, undoubtedly as an allusion to Duroy's phallic prowess. The well-read Duchamp would doubtless have been aware of this, and conveyed the allusion, humorously, to Bergmann.

It might be added that in the wake of Maupassant's enthusiasm for this quintessentially French toy, the bilboquet became more of an adult plaything. To some extent this had always been the case.

Although fundamentally a children's amusement, dating back to the fifteenth century, it had been popular with Henry III and returned as an aristocratic vogue in the eighteenth century: a painting of c.1880, *L'enfant au Bilboquet*, by the French painter Jeanne Bôle, depicts a well-dressed late-eighteenth century adolescent boy holding a cup-and-spike. ³⁷ By 1900, its popularity among adults was such that Paris boasted several small academies devoted to the bilboquet, the most well-known being 'Le Rénovateur du Bilboquet', founded in 1906 and run by Edmond Poineau from Rue Oberkampf in Paris. ³⁸ By 1907 news of this had reached the USA with the *Pittsburgh Daily Post* reporting on the 'Cup-and-Bull Craze' in Paris, and illustrating this with an image of a line-up of earnest bilboquet-wielding grown-ups. ³⁹ This early twentieth-century sense of the bilboquet as an 'adult's toy' adds to its topicality as Duchamp's (sexually-suggestive) gift for his friend, but also explains why it subsequently became the privileged icon of childish play in surrealist art. One could track its presence throughout Magritte's art, where it has generic similarities to other turned

wooden objects that recur in his paintings such as chessmen and table legs. It also figures in a particularly strange painting by Balthus of 1932-3 of Pierre and Betty Leyris (Ulla and Heiner Pietzsch collection, Berlin). The bilboquet's most surprising surrealist incarnation was to occur, however, in relation to the discourse around the surrealist object as this was inaugurated in issue 3 of *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution* of 1931. In this issue we find a highly innovative set of drawings by Giacometti , 'Objets mobiles et muets' (**ILLUSTRATION 7: PAGE OF SASDLR/DRAWINGS BY GIACOMETTI, 1931**) which represent a set of ideas for sculptures, many of which were realised around the 1930-31 period. The toy-like appearance of the 'potential sculptures' in these small drawings is rarely commented on. More than anything they look like objects of play on a table-top. In some cases, elements of toys appear to have been wrenched apart and re-combined. The poetic automatic text which accompanies them seems in fact to deal with the way these 'mobile and mute objects' reflect childish viewpoints, perceptions and associations stemming from the sheer mystery of things. ⁴⁰

All things, near, far, all those ones that have passed and the others, in front, which move and my friends – they change (one is very close, they are far), others come near, go up, go down, ducks on water, there and there, in the space, go up, go down – I sleep here, the flowers on the tapestry, the water from the tap not properly turned-off, the drawings of the curtain, my trousers on a chair, one speaks of a room further away; two or three people, from which train station ? The locomotives whistle, there is no train station here, orange peel is thrown from the top of the terrace, down to the very narrow and deep street – the night, the donkeys bray desperately, towards the morning they were slaughtered – tomorrow I go out – she brings her head close to my ear – her leg the big one – they talked, they moved, there and there, but everything has happened. ⁴¹

Among the accompanying sketches we find allusions to the ducks mentioned in the text (two bird-like heads appear in the drawing second from left in the top row). More to the point, disconnected elements of bilboquets crop up here as residual memories of the past.

Up to now interpretation of these sketches and the way they relate to subsequently realised sculptures – notably *Suspended Ball* of 1930-31 – have been overshadowed by accounts of the violently-tinged elements that were entering into Giacometti's work at around this time. Rosalind Krauss has been particularly persuasive in linking works such as the *Suspended Ball* to ancient rituals such as the Mexican ballgame.⁴² But the presence of the bilboquet challenges this predominantly ethnographic reading. First, then we need to take some care in establishing its presence. In one of the drawings, at the top right of the group, the pin of a bilboquet, identifiable by its lathed form and the string curled at its top, is inserted precariously, along with other enigmatic objects, in a rectangular base and surrounded by what appears to be a rib-cage.⁴³ (**ILLUSTRATION 8:**

GIACOMETTI/DETAIL OF ILLUSTRATION 7) Initially this form is difficult to make out; one has to realise that bilboquets can take one of two forms, possessing either a cup at the end of the lathed handle to catch the ball or a spike to penetrate it; this is closer to the spiked variety, as in Balthus's 1932-3 double-portrait of the Leyrises. In the drawing to the left of this, we find the ball that would normally accompany the spike, with string attached, although now in the context of what is an anticipatory sketch of the aforementioned *Suspended Ball* sculpture (which was to be realised in plaster and metal and wood versions in 1930-1.) The migration of the ball from the bilboquet into this sketch of *Suspended Ball* is far from self-evident; it is only by seeing it as conceptually linked to the sketch next to it, and as part of a group of drawings in which elements of toys have been re-distributed (another ball, with round aperture, appears in the sketch second from left at the bottom), that one realises how the ball has been re-purposed: the string is tied to a rudimentary cage-structure, and the aperture in the ball has been metamorphosed into the groove which hovers above the wedge beneath it. The play-like connotations of the bilboquet are thus boldly transposed into sexualised terms.

The sexual aspect of this transformation was registered in the various well-known responses made by the surrealists when the sketch was turned into a sculpture. Immediately recognising the importance of the *Suspended Ball*, which ushered in the early 1930s obsession with the surrealist 'objet', several early commentators waxed lyrical about the sense of frustration suggested by the movement of the swinging ball as it grazed, but never touched, the wedge.⁴⁴ This was emphasised in the unusual view of the sculpture presented in *Le Surréalisme Service de la Révolution* in December 1931. (**ILLUSTARTION 9 : GIACOMETTI'S SUSPENDED BALL AS REPRODUCED IN SASDLR**). This reading of the sculpture has predominated ever since, but surely the sense of collective frustration it generated among the surrealists might actually be indexed to the common ludic experience of a generation, namely the difficulty of slotting the pin into the ball of the bilboquet: an experience which, ostensibly synonymous with childish play, become increasingly sexualised as the toy passed from childish to adult usage early in the twentieth century. This in fact opens up a much more compelling psycho-analytic background for the sculpture: in surrealist terms, the bilboquet exemplified the way an object connotative of a child's 'innocent' play could foreshadow the mechanics of sexual intercourse.

Giacometti's celebrated sculpture therefore follows directly in the tradition of Duchamp's bilboquet with its dual childhood/sexual associations. Another point that is thrown up by this genealogy is that *Suspended Ball*, as a sculpture, actually stands at a midway point between two forms of proto-surrealist/surrealist practice: between the 'readymade' (as in the Duchampian bilboquet, interpreted as a proto-readymade) and the fabrication of the 'objet' (which was the episode in surrealist aesthetics that Giacometti's sculpture opened onto). It was surely precisely the *toy-like* associations of the sculpture - its relation to the scale and putative functionality of toys as objects of play - that accorded it this half-way position between readymade and *objet*. As noted at the start of this essay, 'sculpture' held a highly ambiguous place within surrealism; for Giacometti's work to function in such a context it necessarily had to have object-like associations. The toy provided the ideal model.⁴⁵

What should also be stressed is the way that the layers of reference in the *Suspended Ball* reprise aspects of the historical destiny of toys. As already noted, according to Rosalind's Krauss's influential reading of the sculpture, which acknowledges that the elements of the work set up an "oscillation of meaning... a constantly shifting theatre of relationships," the piece bears some reference to a ballgame played in ancient Mexico; Krauss thus sees the ball element, in line with the violent and homo-erotic details of the game, as strung along a chain of signification that takes in testicle, buttocks and eyeball.⁴⁶ The ingenuity of this reading notwithstanding, it is clear that the associations with the child's bilboquet suggest a genealogy that is more in line with Giacometti's own psychic history as a child/young adult of the early twentieth century. The point is that if, in *Suspended Ball*, Giacometti did indeed conflate allusions to violent rituals with remnants of toy imagery that were bound up with his own psychic 'pre-history' we are also returned, genealogically, to the cultic origins for toys, as evoked by the likes of Ariès or Agamben.

Giacometti's sculptural objects were produced at a period within Surrealism when, as noted earlier, ethnographic discourse was establishing links between the modern child and the so-called 'primitive'. In that respect, we return to the notion of the *historicity* installed in the toy - the way it acts as a repository for psychological shifts – that is so central to Agamben's theorisation of these utterly peculiar objects. But we also return again to the associative matrix in which the toy was grasped as a historical object within surrealism: via the disappointingly empty vessels and brittle facades of De Chirico; the sinister toys for adults and childish foreshadowing of adulthood evoked by Duchamp's doll and bilboquet; the miniaturised box-constructions of Cornell and Duchamp, with their encapsulation of nineteenth and twentieth century relations of production; and the meditations on the toy's essential materiality in the writings of Benjamin and Caillois.

NOTES

This essay is a much lengthier version of a paper delivered at the Universities of Toronto and East Anglia in early 2017. My thanks to Elizabeth Legge who invited me to speak on the former occasion and to Simon Dell for his hospitality and encouraging remarks on the latter occasion.

1. See Museo Picasso, Málaga: *Toys of the Avant Garde*, 2011. However, the essays in this book are largely concerned with discussing artists as *creators* of toys, not the implications of the toy as source material for avant-garde artists. My catalogue, *Childish Things*, for the exhibition I curated at the Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, in 2010, looked at the toy as source material for art of the 1980s and 90s. I am currently extending that project to produce an account of the 'surrealist' toy from c 1914 to the end of the twentieth century.
2. On play see Susan Laxton: *Surrealism In Play*, Duke University Press, 2019 and David Getsy (ed): *From Version to Subversion: Games Play, and Twentieth Century Art*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011. The essays in Getsy's collection largely looks at games, and their relation to concepts of play, rather than toys. Another interesting exploration of play as a theme in late twentieth century art is Marina Warner: *'Only Make Believe': Ways of Playing* (ex cat): Compton Verney, 2005. Finally, a more general account of play in the tradition of Dada is provided by the essays in Nike Bätzner at el: *Faites Vos Jeux!, Kunst und Spiel seit Dada*, (ex cat), Hatje Kantz, 2005. For a more probing account of play and materiality in Dada practice see Joyce Suechun Cheng : 'Cardboard Toys and Dancing Marionettes : Play, Materiality and Agency in Zurich Dada', in David Hopkins and Michael White (eds) : *Virgin Microbe : Essays on Dada*, Northwestern University Press, 2014, pp 275-309.
3. For a key articulation of the remit of 'material culture' studies see Leora Auslander: 'Beyond Words', *The American Historical Review*, Vol 110, no 4, October 2005, pp 1015-1045. For an excellent study of toys in terms of design history see Megan Brandow-Faller (ed): *Childhood by Design: Toys and the Material Culture of Childhood, 1700-Present*, New York : Bloomsbury, 2018).

4. Rosalind Krauss: 'Giacometti' in William Rubin (ed) : *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*, Vol II, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1984, pp 512-513 and passim. The essay was reprinted in Krauss's *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge Mass and London, 1985 as 'No More Play' (pp 43-85). It is in the latter form that it is probably best-known.
5. Phillipe Ariès: *Centuries of Childhood* (trans Robert Baldick) , Paris 1960 reprinred Harmondsworth : Peregrine Books, 1986, p 65.
6. Rainer Maria Rilke as quoted by Giorgio Agamben: 'Mme Panckouke; or, The Toy Fairy' in *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (trans R.Martinez), Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p 57.
7. Ibid.
8. D.W.Winnicott: *Playing and Reality*, London 1971, reprinted Harmondsworth : Pelican, 1988, p 2.
9. Giorgio Agamben, op cit at note 37 above, p 59.
10. Agamben: 'Reflections on History and Play' in *Infancy and History : On the Destruction of Experience*, translated by Liz Heron, London : Verso, 2007 p 79.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid, p 80.
13. André Breton: 'Manifesto of Surrealism' (1924), translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R.Lane in André Breton : *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, University of Michigan Press, 1972, pp 3-4.
14. Benjamin: 'The Cultural History of Toys' in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings: Vol 2:1927-1934*, ed Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, translated by Rodney Livingstone etal, Cambridge Mass and London, 1999, pp 113-14.
15. Benjamin: 'Marginal Notes on a Monumental Work' in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings*, cited ibid, p 119.

16. Benjamin: 'A Berlin Childhood around 1900', in *Selected Writings: Vol 3: 1935-1938* edited Howard Eiland and Michael W Jennings, translated by Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland and others, Cambridge Mass and London : Harvard University Press, 2002, p 375.
17. Benjamin: 'Marginal Notes on a Monumental Work', op cit in note 10 above, p 117.
18. Georges Bataille: 'l'Art Primitif', *Documents*, 2nd series, no 7, 1930, pp 389-97. For an interesting commentary on this text see Christopher Green : 'The Infant in the Adult : Joan Miró and the Infantile Image in Jonathan Fineberg (ed): *Discovering Child Art: Essays on Childhood, Primitivism and Modernism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, pp 223-229 and passim.
19. For a discussion of Benjamin's links with the Collège see Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings: Vol 3: 1935-1938*, op cit at note 11 above, pp 442-3.
20. Roger Caillois: 'The Myth of Secret Treasures in Childhood' in *The Edge of Surrealism : A Roger Caillois Reader*, op cit at note 10, p 258.
21. Ibid p 260.
22. Ibid p 255.
23. Michel Leiris, 'The Sacred in Everyday Life', trans. by Betsy Wing, in Denis Hollier (ed.): *The College of Sociology 1937-39*, Minneapolis 1988, p 24.
24. Caillois, op cit at note 15 above, p 257.
25. Susan Stewart: *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993, p 58.
26. Giorgio de Chirico: *Il meccanismo del pensiero: Critica, polemica, autobiografia, 1911-1943*, ed Maurizio Faglio, Turin: Einaudi, 1985, p 18.
27. Charles Baudelaire: 'Morale de Joujou', first published in *Le Monde littéraire*, 17th April, 1853. As translated by Jonathan Mayne in Charles Baudelaire: *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, New York: Da Capo, 1964, p 202.

28. André Breton: 'Le Surréalisme' et la Peinture, in *La Révolution Surréaliste*, no 4, 1925, pp 29-30.
30. Translated by Simon Watson Taylor: André Breton: *Surrealism and Painting*, New York: Harper and Row/Icon editions, 1972, p 6.
29. Paolo Balducci: *De Chirico : The Metaphysical Period 1888-1919*, op cit at note 1 above, pp 286-293.
30. Balducci, ibid p 25.
31. I am grateful to Victoria Noel-Johnson for showing me some of de Chirico's collection of models in his Rome studio at the Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico in April 2015.
32. For an overview of Duchamp as social satirist/caricaturist see Dawn Ades, Neil Cox and David Hopkins: *Marcel Duchamp*, London : Thames and Hudson, 1999, Chapter 1, pp 8-23.
33. See: *Jouets: Paris 1900* (ex cat), Délégation a L'action artistique de la ville de Paris/Société des amis du jouet, 1984, pp 34-5.
34. Arturo Schwarz also makes this suggestion: see Arturo Schwarz: *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, New York/London : Delano Greenidge Editions/Thames and Hudson, 1997, vol 1, pp 4-5.
35. See Max Bergmann: page from diary, April 18th 1910 (coll Klaus-Peter Bergmann), as reproduced in Matthias Mühling : 'Bilboquet 1910' in Helmut Friedel, Thomas Girst, Matthias Mühling and Felicia Rappe (eds): *Marcel Duchamp in Munich* : Lenbachhaus and Kunstbau, Munich and Schirmer/Mosel, 2012, p 112.
36. See Matthias Mühling : 'Bilboquet', cited ibid p 110.
37. Gaston Vuillier's *Plaisirs et Jeux depuis les origins* (Paris,: Rothschild, 1900) has a short section on the history of the bilboquet and includes a print ('after Deveria') of young children playing with the toy (pp 164-7).
38. *Jouets: Paris 1900* (ex cat), op cit at note 28 above, p 70.
39. *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, March 3rd, 1907, p 39.

40. In a fascinating essay Michael Stone-Richards reads a number of Giacometti's slightly later poetic texts as "returning through the underside of dark play to the language of childhood and the maternal space". He notes, for example Giacometti's deployment of the "fixated attention characteristic of the child (rarely on more than one object at a time)". See his 'Giacometti's objects: poetry, childhood and the neurotic theatre of projection' in Peter Read and Julia Kelly (eds); *Giacometti: Critical Essays*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2009, p 54 and passim. Like Krauss (in her Giacometti essay, cited at note 4 above) he also fleetingly pays attention to the boardgame-like aspect of works such as Giacometti's *No More Play* (1931-2), arguing that such works "imply the position of the child... they may be taken as toys for a certain kind of child." (p 57). Surprisingly, he does not relate the 'Objets mobiles et muets' so directly to toys.
41. Alberto Giacometti : 'Objets Mobiles et Muets', *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution*, No 3, Dec 1931, pp 18-19. Translation by Claudia Hopkins.
42. Krauss, op cit at note 4 above, pp 512-513.
43. In discussing this image, Julia Kelly talks about "(the)skeletal forms and raffia costume teetering on a de Chiricoesque base" but misses the bilboquet. See *her Art, Ethnography and the Life of Objects*, Manchester University Press, 2007, p 146
44. The most significant readings of the object in this respect are by Salvador Dalí : 'Objets surréalistes', *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution* (Paris), no 3, December 1931, pp 16-17, and Maurice Nadeau : *The History of Surrealism*, translated Richard Howard, Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989, p 188.
45. It would be possible to look at other works by Giacometti in this way. Krauss suggests as much with her discussion of *On ne joue pas* (*No More Play*) of 1933 as a 'gameboard'. See *her Originality of the Avant-Garde*, op cit at note 4 above. See also note 40 above.
46. Krauss, op cit ibid, p 513.

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